Crisis and Critique:
Philosophical Analysis and Current Events

Contributions of the 42nd International
Wittgenstein Symposium
August 4–10, 2019
Kirchberg am Wechsel

Volume
XXVII

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Printed with the support of the
Department for Science and Research
of the Province of Lower Austria

Kirchberg am Wechsel, 2019
Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society
Taking Pictures in the Right Light

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Abstract

What is the experience of being stuck in a picture? And what is its philosophical importance? This paper attempts an answer through a reading of Philosophical Investigations §§ 96-7, where Wittgenstein uses the Tractatus as an example of a picture. Consequently, the paper’s contribution to the literature is twofold: it explains the nature of being stuck in a picture and shows why Wittgenstein’s use of the Tractatus as an example of a picture suggests the correctness of the resolute reading of the book. My paper has five sections. First, I discuss what it means to read the Tractatus resolutely. Second, I explain Wittgenstein’s idea in which Wittgenstein presents this idea. Fourth, I argue that his presentation cannot be squared with a non-resolute reading of the Tractatus. And finally, I give a sketch of how his presentation squares with a resolute reading.

In Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein uses the analogy of being held captive by a picture. This analogy gets at the experience of being stuck in a particular way of conceiving something (e.g., a word’s meaning, a rule, or a conception of language), precisely because we are unable to see that this way is only one of multiple. In setting forth this analogy, Wittgenstein cites and reflects on propositions from the Tractatus (PI §§94ff). This paper both looks at why Wittgenstein uses the Tractatus in setting forth his analogy of being stuck in a picture, and it explores what this suggests about interpreting the Tractatus correctly. I will argue that the textual structure Wittgenstein uses to present the idea of being stuck in a picture cannot be reconciled with a non-resolute reading.

My argument proceeds in five sections. First, I will give an overview of the core features of a resolute reading of the Tractatus. Second, I explain Wittgenstein’s idea of being stuck in a picture and what makes this a unique phenomenon. Third, I will give a close reading of the sections in which Wittgenstein presents this idea in the Investigations. Fourth, I will argue that his presentation cannot be squared with a non-resolute reading of the Tractatus. Finally, I will give a consistent interpretation available for a resolute reader.

I. Reading the Tractatus resolutely

This section proceeds in two steps. First, I give James Conant and Cora Diamond’s core commitments for any resolute reading of the Tractatus. Second, I look at one helpful way, given by Conant, to see the difference between resolute and non-resolute readings.

In their essay “On Reading the Tractatus Resolutely”, Conant and Diamond clarify that a reading should be called “resolute” when it takes Wittgenstein’s second-to-last proposition to the letter: we should realize the Tractatus’s propositions are nonsensical and discard them (TLP 6.54). As a result, a resolute reading holds that, rather than elaborating a metaphysical stance on the relation between the world and language, the aim of the Tractatus is leading the reader to realize the deeply-confused nature of this endeavor. In other words, the book does not present philosophical theories or doctrines: it shows the futility of arguing for them (see also Bronzo and Conant 2017; see esp. Diamond 1991).

To this end, Conant and Diamond outline two core commitments of any resolute reading. The first is this: contrary to non-resolute readings, the Tractatus does not hold that a nonsensical proposition can convey ineffable insight, and the book’s nonsensical propositions do not convey this type of insight (Conant and Diamond 2004: 43). For example, there is no difference between the nature of the nonsensicality in following two propositions: “You zep zop the boogie” and “Socrates is identical”. Both are plain nonsense and there is no ineffable insight that shows itself forth in either.

Second, a resolute reading holds that recognizing a proposition of the Tractatus as nonsensical does not require its own theory of what makes a proposition nonsensical (Conant and Diamond 2004: 44). Following from this commitment, a resolute reader can hold that the theory of nonsense given within the book is made up of nonsensical propositions, while also holding that determining these propositions to be nonsense does not require another, alternative theory of nonsense (Conant and Diamond 2004: 53-5).

Conant gives a helpful way to look at the disagreement between non-resolute and resolute readers of the Tractatus. He argues that the two readers differ in what type of commitments they think Wittgenstein has made in the book. Consider, for example, the saying-showing distinction: “What can be shown cannot be said” (TLP 4.1212). Non-resolute readers take Wittgenstein, at the time composing the Tractatus, to have been committed to this distinction; that is, what shows itself forth in logical form, cannot be expressed in words. A resolute reader, on the other hand, considers this commitment as only apparent. Wittgenstein was not actually committed to this view. He makes this apparent commitment to show that philosophical theories which might at first appear profound, are actually plain nonsense.

In addition to apparent commitments, resolute readers often allege that Wittgenstein, at the time of completing the Tractatus, also had actual commitments, despite the resolute view that the Tractatus’s aim is to free one of this type of commitment. Conant calls these “unwitting commitments”. An unwitnessing commitment is one which Wittgenstein (at the time of the Tractatus) actually held without knowing it. Exactly which commitments (if any) one counts as unwitnessing varies among resolute readers. Conant and Diamond, for example, argue that Wittgenstein was unwittingly committed to the possibility of a perfect canon of logical analysis, a logical notation that could lay bare the
sense of what one says, making it perfectly perspicuous (Bronzo and Conant 2017: 190; Conant 2007: 102). \(^1\)

II. Being stuck in a picture

This section proceeds in three steps. First, I briefly explain what I take Wittgenstein to mean by being stuck in a picture. Second, I explain the particular difficulties that come along with being stuck in a picture. Third, I demonstrate the two ways someone stuck in a picture can explain seemingly contradictory cases in order to preserve the coherence of her picture.

Starting from PI §94, Wittgenstein sets forth and uses the analogy of being stuck in a picture. To be stuck in a picture means to be stuck in a particular conception of something and to not even realize that this particular conception can be questioned. The person stuck in the picture, whom I will refer to as the "picture-captive", cannot even see that the way they view something is only one way of seeing it; rather, they take their conception to be how that thing actually is (PI §103; see also, §94). For example, suppose that there's a town where only red flowers grow. One day, a child in this town asks her mother, "What are flowers?" The mother replies: "Flowers are those parts of plants with red petals." To an intransigent child who takes her mother to being giving a prescriptive definition, not an example, this conception of flowers can become a picture. So, if this child saw a purple lilac, for instance, they would simply think it wasn't a flower.

Now, a picture can be either inconsistent or consistent. If it is inconsistent, we usually accept that it's wrong, especially when see consistent alternatives. But just because a picture is consistent does not mean it's automatically right. What I take Wittgenstein to bring out is that even if a picture is consistent on the picture-captive's own terms, it can still be wrong, and this wrongness is different from simple inconsistency. Pictures can also be wrong due to being misconceived. The ability to be self-consistent yet misconceived is what I take to be unique to pictures, and what makes them so difficult to get outside of. \(^2\)

When a picture is misconceived, the picture-captive has two ways to remain self-consistent in light of seemingly (to the outside observer) contradictory cases.

(i) Either, the picture blinds the picture-captive from seeing some relevant cases as relevant (PI §114);

(ii) Or, the picture-captive construes every apparently relevant case as fitting into her picture, even when there are obvious, more plausible alternatives available from the outside (see, for example, Conant and Diamond 2004: 46-7).

Let me extend my earlier example to demonstrate (i) and (ii), and thus give an example of two consistent yet misconceived pictures. The child, maintaining that all flowers are red, might deny that lilacs are flowers. That is, since lilacs aren't red, they aren't flowers (Cf. PI §107). This would be an example of (i). But alternatively, the child can also accept that lilacs are flowers, and hold that the particular color of lilacs is a shade of red. That is, on the color spectrum, the purple section (although possibly disin-

\(^{1}\) One strategy for arguing for the correctness of a resolute reading of the Tractatus focuses on Wittgenstein's later reflections on his earlier thought. The idea is that in looking at how later Wittgenstein reflected on his earlier work, we can see how he himself understood it. This strategy is brought up, but not pursued, in Conant and Diamond 2004 (83) and Conant 2007 (41).

\(^{2}\) This is the strategy I will use in section IV, applying it to PI §§96-7.

\(^{3}\) In these cases, one cannot merely show the picture-captive why her outlook is contradictory: one must show her that she was thinking about the issue in the wrong way.

\(^{4}\) The intransive with the red section also is red. This construal would be an example of (ii). Of course, the outside observer might hold that in both (i) and (ii), the child's explanation is less plausible than the explanation that not all flowers are red, but this explanation is simply not available to a picture captive because the captive holds her mother's definition as essential to the nature of flowers. So, a picture can be wrong while still being consistent if one takes the picture and evaluates it on its own terms.

III. A close reading of PI §§96-7

In this section, I give a close reading of PI §§96-7, where Wittgenstein cites the Tractatus and uses the idea of being stuck in a picture.

In §96, thinking, considered as something unique and mysterious, is termed an "illusion". Moreover, this illusion is said to often be joined by the illusions of language, logic, and propositions being similarly unique. Their uniqueness consists in their correspondence to the world; in short, they seem to obey the same logical rules (Cf. PI §94). These illusions and their correspondence with the world form a picture.

In the subsequent section, we see how this picture can seem like our only option: if the same logical rules underlie our language and thought, on the one hand, and the world, on the other, then we must presuppose the former in light of the latter's apparent existence (PI §97). All the parts involved develop an aura of importance and fundamentality. For example, any sensible proposition seems to depend on it sharing some deep, logical structure with the world. At the end of this section, Wittgenstein cites TLP 5.5563, which presents the same ideas about the illusions and correspondence with the world, without terming them illusions.

IV. A non-resolute Tractatus is not a consistent picture

I will argue that non-resolute readings (i.e., any reading that takes Wittgenstein's commitments in the Tractatus as actual) cannot be squared with PI §§96-7.

As we just saw, Wittgenstein gives his example of a picture by citing and elaborating on the Tractatus. But he also uses the idea of pictures — and our propensity to get stuck in them — elsewhere (see, for example, OC §§146-7). So, pictures aren't a uniquely Tractarian phenomenon. So, why does Wittgenstein use the Tractatus's propositions as examples of pictures?

At first, a non-resolute reading of the Tractatus seems to be fruitful. As I noted above, the Investigations cites apparent commitments of the Tractatus and refers to them as "illusions" and 'pictures' (Cf. PI §97 & TLP 5.5563). So, it seems plausible that in the sections above, Wittgenstein is reflecting his own actual commitments which he held at the time of completing the Tractatus.

But I think non-resolute readings cannot adequately explain Wittgenstein's reflection on the Tractatus for the following reason. We saw in section II that, while pictures can be either self-consistent or contradictory, what makes being stuck in pictures a uniquely difficult phenomenon is the picture's potential to be both self-consistent and misconceived. Now, the non-resolute reading above holds that the Investigations uses the Tractatus's apparent commitments as examples of a being stuck in a picture; that is, Wittgenstein was stuck in a picture that made his early book seem coherent. But, if my characterization of being
stuck in a picture is correct, the apparent commitments are not good examples of pictures at all: even if one holds that they are misconceived, one cannot hold that they are self-consistent. That is, they lead to contradictions even when one takes them on their own terms.

A familiar objection to the Tractatus illustrates this point well, which I will call the "graspability objection." The graspability objection shows that the saying-showing distinction leads to contradictions. It goes as follows: it is contradictory to hold that a text can express ineffable features of reality, when the criterion for effability is the same as that for thinkability. In other words, when what is thinkable is equivalent to what is sayable (which I take to be most non-resolute reader's stance on the Tractatus), there is nothing one can think/grasp/underline that is unsayable. This contradiction results even when one adopts the Tractatus's own terms. So, even if the apparent commitments are misconceived, the fact that they are also internally contradictory would mean that a non-resolute reading misses the unique difficulties of being stuck in pictures. In short, it wouldn't make sense for Wittgenstein to use the Tractatus as an example of a picture if he viewed that book non-resoluto, unless one holds that Wittgenstein's example illustrates his point poorly (if at all).

V. Making resolute sense of PI §§96-7

To conclude, I want to mention one way a resolute reader can make sense of Wittgenstein's reflection. One can hold that in §§96-7, Wittgenstein is trying to get us to once more realize the deeply flawed nature of the Tractatus's apparent commitments, and second, we are supposed to realize that the way the Tractatus goes about leading us to reject these commitments is misconceived. In other words, one could hold that the Tractatus is supposed to elucidate the meaninglessness of its propositions, but that later Wittgenstein considered its strategy of elucidation as being stuck in a picture. The picture could be this: the Tractatus's elucidation frees a picture-captive, but it does so in a way that often leads her into another picture.

This reading is supported in two ways: (a) Wittgenstein's example would be a picture par excellence: it's self-consistent (there is nothing inconsistent in freeing one from a picture only to be caught in another), yet it's misconceived (for we want to be free of all pictures, not just one or the other); and (b), this reading finds textual support (see especially PI §§98-9).

Acknowledgments
This paper is indebted to Sebastian Sunday Grève, who gave insightful and probing comments on earlier drafts. I would also like to thank Amelia Pollard, who listened and asked the right questions.

Bibliography